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Module code: HPMS 7006 Module title: Thomas Becket	Student ID number: 2114844	Educational support needs: No
Module tutor: Professor Janet Burton		
Assignment due date: 17/03/2023		
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THE BECKET LEAVES

Chris Dixon – December 2022

In about 1882 a French philologist named Marie-Paul-Hyacinthe Meyer was planning a new edition of 'The Life of Thomas of Canterbury' by Garnier [Guernes] de Pont Sainte-Maxence.

As part of his research, Meyer discovered some fragments of a life of Saint Thomas written in French verse in a 13th century script together with remarkable painted illustrations on each of the eight surviving pages. Meyer rewrote his book as 'Fragments d'une vie de Saint Thomas de Cantorbery', a detailed analysis of the manuscript together with photographs of the originals.¹

For almost 80 years, Meyer's book was the sole reference to these manuscript pages until they were reprinted in a life of Thomas Becket based on the contemporary biographer William Fitzstephen and published in 1961. The source of the illustrations is described as 'taken from an early 13th century French verse life of Becket'.²

Then, in 1986, the original parchment leaves were offered for sale at Sotheby's, London and were acquired on behalf of Sir Paul Getty who loaned it to the British Library.³ The Leaves are now housed in the library of The Wormsley Estate, Buckinghamshire, as part of the collection of the late Sir Paul Getty.

The full extent of the manuscript is not known but the existing fragments are four leaves of high quality vellum parchment on each side of which exists a detailed illustration with Latin headings. Beneath each illustration there is text in French verse (octosyllabic rhyming couplets).

¹ M.Paul.Meyer, *Fragments d'une vie de Saint Thomas de Cantorbery*, (Paris : Librairie de Firmin Didot et cie, 1885), Introduction, p 3 et seq.

² G.Greenway (editor), *The Life and Death of Thomas Becket*, (London: The Folio Society, 1961), 'Illustrations' (flyleaf).

³ J.Backhouse and C.de Hamel, *The Becket Leaves*, (London: The British Library, 1988), p 13.

Origins and Authorship

To help identify the origins of the manuscript, one must first attempt to identify the source of the poem. Meyer considered this to be the most important question – but also the most simple to solve.⁴ He discovered that the text was a direct translation of the ‘Quadrilogus’; a composite life of Becket written in Latin based on four contemporary biographies.⁵ This had been created at the instigation of Roger, a monk from Crowland, and completed by Elias of Evesham in 1199.⁶

The scribe and artist are not known for certain but it is likely that it is a copy of an original by Matthew Paris, a monk from St Alban’s Abbey, born in 1200. He was a prolific writer, scribe and artist and was known to have produced biographies of other saints such as Edward the Confessor and Saint Alban.⁷ There exist two important clues to the origin. One is that on the flyleaf of *Vie de Seinte Auban*, widely accepted to be by Paris, there is a note referring to ‘a book about St Thomas the Martyr which I translated and illustrated [transtuli et protraxi]’.⁸ There is also a reference to Paris’s work in a text written over a century later by Thomas Walsingham, a monk at St Albans, who wrote that Paris had:

‘Written and most elegantly illustrated lives of Saint Alban, Amphibalus and the archbishops Thomas and Edmund’.⁹

The style of the illustrations and page layout is consistent with that of known work by Matthew Paris. Plates I and II (see pages 14 and 15) show a page from ‘The Book of St Alban’ and one of the Becket Leaves. Many similarities can be observed, for example, the horses tails and legs, the illustration extending outside the frame, the

⁴ Meyer, Introduction ‘Source de poeme’, p xiii.

⁵ Ibid. Meyer points out that there were five authors but the narrative of Alan of Tewkesbury ends where that of Benedict of Peterborough commences.

⁶ A.Duggan, *Thomas Becket – A Textual History of his Letters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp 205-207.

⁷ Backhouse, pp 14-15.

⁸ S.Lloyd and R.Reader, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21268>>, [Accessed 1st December 2022].

⁹ Lloyd and Reader.

rubrics (headings) within the illustrations and the inclined heads of the figures and the techniques suggesting crowds. Similarities do not constitute proof but they add to evidence.

The text is written in Early Gothic Quadrata typical of the 12th and 13th centuries. Example attributes are the split ascenders and the use of alternative forms for the letter 'r' (resembling the number 2). The diagonal line found over the letter 'i' (precursor of the modern dotted 'i's) is evident in Gothic Textura Quadrata from 1323 but rare in earlier scripts.¹⁰ This is evident in the French verse, not in the Latin text on the illustrations.¹¹

The images all depict important events in the life of Thomas Becket and in all but one, the archbishop is depicted. The exception is Folio 3 (Recto – right or front side) which illustrates the coronation of Henry II's son Henry in June 1170 and the lavish banquet which followed.

The Coronation of the Young King

In this image, Becket is not shown because he was absent. It is his very absence which makes this one of the most important events of the story of the dispute between Henry II and Becket.

It had long been a custom for the Capetian Kings of France to seal the succession by the coronation, during their lifetime, of their heirs. The most recent was in 1131 when Louis VII was crowned by Pope Innocent II six years before the death of Louis VI.¹² The practice had not occurred with an English King although King Stephen had attempted more than once to arrange the coronation of his son Eustace of Boulogne. Papal consent, however, was refused.¹³

¹⁰ M.Drogin, *Medieval Calligraphy*, (New Jersey: Allenheld, Osmun & Co – 2nd edition 1989), Plate 51 (p 62).

¹¹ Lancaster University, Gothic Textura, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/yorkdoom/palweb/week13/palwk13d.htm>, [Accessed: 31st October 2022]. Note: I believe that this webpage was intended for students transliterating medieval texts. I am not sure it was intended for public use.

¹² D.Crouch, *The Reign Of King Stephen*, (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), p. 246.

¹³ Ibid. pp.246, 259.

The problem for Henry II was the absence of Archbishop Thomas Becket. He decided to arrange for the ceremony to be performed by Roger, Archbishop of York. There is some doubt as to whether this was a popular move. William Fitzstephen reported that the coronation was 'against the desire and opinion of almost everyone in the kingdom' and that 'the letter from the Pope forbidding the coronation had been delivered on the Saturday before the coronation'.¹⁴ Matthew Strickland notes (citing Roger of Howland's 'The annals of Roger Howland, vol II'), an opposite opinion that the ceremony took place 'with the great joy of the clergy and the people'.¹⁵

Thomas later told the king that he had 'despoiled the church of Canterbury ... of its privilege of consecrating kings'.¹⁶

¹⁴ D.C.Douglas (editor), *English Historical Documents (vol II)*, (Abingdon: Routledge, Second Edition 1981), pp 803-4.

¹⁵ M.Strickland, *Henry the Young King 1155-1183*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p 85.

¹⁶ M.Staunton, *The Lives Of Thomas Becket*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 175

The Selected Image



Image copied from 'The Becket Leaves' by Janet Backhouse and Christopher de Hamel.

This image consists of 66 lines of French verse in octosyllabic rhyming couplets including a six line rubric (heading) in red ink. The heading reads as follows:

<u>Original</u>	<u>Translation (with suggested corrections)</u> ¹⁷
Li rois henris grante e dune	King Henry grants and gives
Da engleterre la curune	The crown of England
A sun fiz esne henri	To his eldest? [beloved] son Henry
Repentant fu e marri	He later repented and was annoyed? [distressed]
Li prelat d'Everwic Roger	The prelate of York Roger
A tort l'emprist a curuner.	Wrongly undertook the crowning.

The image is constructed in two halves. On the left hand side is depicted the coronation. Just above the head of the young king is the heading 'rex.h. iunior'. He is seated on a throne surrounded by at least four bishops and one other person whose face is just visible. The bishops are robed and wearing mitres. On Henry's left in the foreground the Archbishop of York is depicted handing Henry a sceptre. Just above is a heading 'archie[pisco]pi rog[er] Ebor[acensi]s'. The other bishops are described in the text below as Gilbert Foliot of London, Walter of Rochester and Joscelyn of Salisbury:

'L'evesque fu de Lundres la
E cist de Rocestre i va.
Li evesque de Salisbire.'

This is partly confirmed by the biographer Roger of Pontigny.¹⁸ Strickland, quoting from 'English Coronation Records' edited by K.G.Wickham Legg, 1901, describes an important role at the coronation for Hugh, bishop of Durham.¹⁹

¹⁷ Translation by C.J.Birkitt, <<https://www.angelfire.com/pa4/becketleaves/becketleaveseng5.html>>, 2006 [Accessed 29th November 2022]

¹⁸ Staunton, The Lives, p 178.

¹⁹ Strickland, p 85.

At the top of the page above this section of the image is a rubric in heavily abbreviated Latin:

‘Coronat[ur] rex H iunior p[er] manu[m] Rog[er] archie[pisco]pi
Ebor[acensi]s i[n] p[rae]judici[um] ecc[lesi]e Cant[uariensis].’²⁰

Translated as:

‘The coronation of King Henry the Younger by the hand of Roger,
Archbishop of York to the prejudice of the church of Canterbury’

On the right hand side of the image is depicted the banquet following the coronation.
The rubric at the top on this side reads:

‘Celebrat[ur] [con]vivim[us] coronac[i]onis m[in]ist[ra]t p[ate]r [et]
Se rege[m] e[ss]e diffitet[ur].

Translated as:

The coronation feast is celebrated, the father serves his son and denies that
he [Henry II] is the king.’²¹

The image shows the banqueting table laden with meats, bread and wine. Henry II (labelled as ‘Rex H[e]nr[icus] p[ate]r’) is serving a covered bowl to his seated son (labelled as ‘Rex H[e]nr[icus] filius eius’). Seated below the table is a minstrel playing a harp. There are two guests at the table one of which is holding a scroll on which is written:

‘Ecce maiestas nimis inclinata’

Translated as:

²⁰ Meyer, (transliteration), p 15 (Page number incorrectly shown as 8).

²¹ This is a translation by Google upon which I cannot improve.

‘Behold; majesty very much bent low’

This may well be a reference to an anecdote told by Paris in his ‘Historia Anglorum’ and to which Strickland refers, when Henry II comments that it is unusual for a King to serve his son. The young king replies that it is quite fitting for the son of a king to be served by the son of a count.²²

Artistic Techniques

The image is drawn in black or brown ink and tinted with ‘a delicately coloured wash’²³ Green, blue and red are the colours utilised and the leaves retain colours showing little evidence of fading. The image is contained in a rectangular frame painted onto the parchment. The work has the sign of being rather hurried and there has been some lack of care in the colouring. This is an example from a close up photograph:

²² Strickland, p 90.

²³ Backhouse, p 15.



Photograph of the original by the author (C.P.Dixon).

The green colouring on the young king's crown and the blue on the top of his tunic are not skilfully applied. This is not typical of other similar illustrations by Matthew Paris and this fact lends weight to the idea that the manuscript is a copy – possibly one of many – which may be the work of less experienced or skilful artists or scribes in the scriptorium of St Alban's Abbey. Compare the image from *The Lives of Saint Alban and Amphibalus* on plate I below (Page 13) in which the colouring is much neater.

Purpose, Intended Viewers and Possible Provenance

Most of the Lives of Thomas Becket were written in Latin and without illustrations. This meant that they were probably almost exclusively kept in ecclesiastical houses such as abbeys, monasteries, cathedrals or important churches. The nobles, and aristocracy would generally have spoken French. The probable purpose of this

translation of the *Quadrilogus* into French verse would be to render the story accessible to the laity. Copies would be made to lend, or sell, to wealthy individuals or households. Janet Backhouse writes that Matthew Paris noted that 'he translated and prepared the text of which the Countess of Arundel has a copy'.²⁴ The recipient was Isabella de Warenne who became Countess of Arundel in 1234. Backhouse imagines a possible scenario for the provenance of the Leaves that Isabella might have given the book to the Cistercian abbey she founded in Norfolk. During the time of the English Reformation the book might have been transferred for safekeeping to Flanders, possibly another Cistercian nunnery such as Groeninghe-lez-Courtrai which was suppressed in 1797 at the time when Jacques Goethals-Vercruysse was buying relics of libraries.²⁵ Apart from the note by Paris, there is no evidence that this is the actual provenance of The Leaves but it does provide a believable possibility.

Summary

The Becket Leaves are considered to be a manuscript of huge importance. Sir Paul Getty certainly thought so because he paid almost £1.4 million at auction in 1986 for just these four leaves.²⁶ There remains uncertainty about the origin of the manuscript but as described above, I am persuaded that it is very likely to be a copy or an original by Matthew Paris of St Alban's. It is widely accepted that both the illustrations and the script of the text is not by the hand of Paris. However, there is evidence that it was copied by scribes at St Albans.

The most interesting illustration is that of the coronation of Henry II's son, Henry as the young king. Becket was not present but that very fact was probably the last straw in the long running dispute between the King and Becket. Although a reconciliation was achieved between Henry and Thomas at Freteval in July 1170, evidenced by the king's writ of 1170²⁷, the King was so infuriated by Becket's decision to excommunicate the archbishop of York and the other participating

²⁴ Backhouse, p 18.

²⁵ Ibid. p 19.

²⁶ Ibid. p 3.

²⁷ English Historical Documents, p.807.

bishops that in exasperation he uttered the fateful words which directly led to the murder of Thomas Becket in December 1170.²⁸

²⁸ English Historical Documents, p. 809.

La pucea karade trunaru. Mur. Ioscharmi e die li'a.
 Reclam tu oxistive Anban unione. Di li kut e ant vestire.

Acade gent e cinque. Dunt nance de gent nance
 ki a autres ad un malu. Se puer fil uenit venice salu.



Lur nus proiez celui keist nerrai messias
 i en croiz moe fust d'hi ia par uidas
 il nus ki sa faicure sumes ne perde pas
 au nus fait si en dient amen e haut e bas
Et cumence la passion seir arade.
 Jehenater arade senglante debuse
 Quant ot des miracles ke iesus ont uure
 Pur le marcir auban ki est ia decole
 e us a quike peine ad us le ciel dresce
 Sen ad umblemee dammedeu mar
 A genoulz e a cures ad le cervice munte
 Suman le cors auban ka uoer ad desire
 I pue d'ur nerrai si deit nerrai le miraille
 Quant est uer arade ki tat fu manmene
 Par felume lat escharm egable
 Is dist il arade cheuater alofe
 As ar reel mas iesu le deu crucifie

PLATE I

Trinity College Dublin

Manuscripts and Archives Research Library

Page from 'The Book of St Alban' – illustrator and scribe Matthew Paris.

<https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/concern/works/8p58pm63q> [accessed 25/11/2022].

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